DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 203 225 CG 015 208

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TITLE Gender, the Bem Scale, and Sexually Biased Pronouns.
PUB DATE Mar 80
NOTE 16p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association (26th, Washington, DC, March 26-29, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Androgyny: *Cognitive Processes: *Grammar: Perception: *Pronouns: Self Concept: *Sex Bias: *Sex Differences: Sex Role: *Speech Communication: Syntax
IDENTIFIERS Bem Sex Role Inventory

ABSTRACT

The generic use of masculine terms may be viewed as a grammatical device that carries the non-specific meaning of gender without confusion with the specific meaning, or as a practice in which the masculine terms retain their gender-specific meaning in neutral contexts and bias the perceiver toward the interpretations of male references. In three studies examining the extent of sex bias caused by generically used masculine pronouns, 138 females and 72 males were asked to provide names to antecedents in gender neutral sentences containing masculine pronouns. Male and female college students (N=30 each) responded to the same sentences containing neutral pronoun forms. The Bem Scale, given to 57 respondents, showed no relationship between adherence to traditional sex roles and male bias in interpretation. Results indicated that masculine pronouns create bias, but that the perceivers' attitudes also influence interpretation. (Author/NRB)

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ED203225

Gender, the Bem Scale, and Sexually Biased Pronouns.

SEPA, March, 1980.

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What name comes to your mind as a possible proper name or first name of the person in the following sentence? "The average student often feels lonely when he first comes to college." Please think of what name to give to this person. Have you all thought of a name? Did you think of a male name? A female name? The sex of "the average student" is supposed to be indeterminate, and the interpretation of thinking of a male or of a female as the referent of the pronoun "he" is supposed to be of equal probability, because "he" is being used in its generic function rather than in its specific function. The problem is that male reference for masculine pronouns can overshadow an intent of generic interpretation.

Whether the generic use of masculine terms perpetuates a harmful sex bias in language that should be deleted, or whether it's just a nuisance, remains in dispute because there are two sides to the argument about the consequences of using masculine words such as "man" and pronouns such as "he" in gender neutral contexts, and each side can present supporting reasons. The aim of the current investigation was to examine both sides and empirically clarify the relations between the generic function of masculine pronouns and the expressed sexual bias in responding to their occurence in gender neutral contexts.

One side views the generic function to be a formal grammatical device that carries the non-specific meaning of gender without confusion with the specific meaning, and to be an automatic habit, so unconsciously used that attempting to change it is futile (Lakoff, 1975). The function is like unmarked members of adjective pairs such as "deep." We can ask "How deep is the puddle" without confusion, and expect the answer to be of any depth. The

marked adjective "shallow" does presuppose that the response will be polarized (Clark & Clark, 1977). The female pronouns appear to be analogous, referring specifically and only to one sex. Any bias that occurs in interpretation of the generic function is considered to reflect the attitudes of the perceiver. Historically, changes in forms for reference have reflected changes in the attitudes of the speech community rather than the reverse (Allen, 1980; Bodine, 1975).

The other side of the argument is that the masculine terms can retain their gender specific meaning in neutral contexts, causing confusion in communication and biasing the perceiver toward the interpretation of male reference (Beard, 1946). Unlike dimensional adjectives, which describe continuous dimensions and are relative terms, gender is specific. The idea, which fits the concept of linguistic determinism (Whorf, 1956) is that the inherent ambiguity of meaning in the language forms influences their interpretation. For example, Allen (1980) points out that when children and adults are asked to illustrate the concepts of "Primitive Man" or "Civilized Man" they drew men and not women, although these terms are intended to represent both sexes.

To test for male bias, Moulton, Robinson, and Elias (1978) asked male and female college students to write a fictional story (not about themselves) for a theme. Different groups were given the theme "In a large coeducational institution the average student will feel isolated in his introductory courses" (or "students" "in their introductory courses," or "student" "in his or her introductory courses"). A shift toward an equal proportion of female and male characters, given the gender neutral pronoun theme, would indicate sex bias induced by the use of the masculine pronouns. The character's gender in each story was determined by a follow-up request to name the character. For both

sexes there was a higher percentage of female reference for the "his or her" form of the theme than for the generic form.

Study 1

To present the sex bias problem in my classes, I simplified Moulton's (et al.) procedure.

Procedure

I explained that I wanted to collect some data on the variety of names that easily come to mind in today's college students, as I had an interest in current naming practices. As a means of collecting the information, I asked them to volunteer to respond to each sentence I read by writing whatever name came to mind that could be used as a first name of the person in that sentence. After the 83 volunteers had written names for the first five sentences in Table 1 of the handout, they wrote "M" next to each name intended for a male, and "F" next to each intended female name, with the rationale that some names, such as "Terry," are sex ambiguous. They also indicated their own sex. Respondents who wrote 2 or 3 female names were classified as neutral. Those with more than 3 female names were classified as biased toward female, and those with more than 3 male names as biased toward male.

Results

As seen in Table 2A of the handout, 69% of the males and 30% of the females showed male bias in their responses. During the discussion that followed, students reported that they had not thought about the number of female or male names they had written. Their own behavior negated the need to argue about whether or not the generic use of masculine pronouns had influenced their interpretation of the sentences.

Discussion

These results support Moulton (et al.) and the interpretation that the masculine generic pronouns do perpetuate a sexual bias. One problem with the procedure is that a generic masculine pronoun represents a nonspecific person, a person of either sex that is not known to the perceiver. Requesting a proper name could be interpreted as asking for a specific referent, someone in particular that the perceiver knew. One could expect some names of known people because of familiarity and frequency of hearing and saying those names. But if respondents were using only names of specifically known people, the male bias observed in Study 1 could be an artifact of knowing more males. The reliability of the results with a bigger set of sentences, and the requirement of generating names without specific referents in mind were tested in Study 2.

Study 2

Procedure

As an introduction to the generic pronoun problem in the next's semester's classes, the procedure was repeated with the additional 5 sentences in Table 1 on the handout, and with the additional final request of 60 of the 80 volunteers to write "K" next to each sentence where they had thought of some specific person when writing the name. Respondents who wrote from 4 to 6 female names were classified as neutral, those with more than 6 female names as biased toward female, and those with more than 6 male names as biased toward male.

Results

As seen on Table 2B of the handout, the results were almost identical to the previous semester. Table 3 on the handout indicates that both sexes wrote names of known and unknown referents, with males writing an equal proportion of names

of particular and of unknown referents, and females writing more male names for unknown referents. This difference between the groups may be due to the smaller number of male respondents.

Discussion

The male bias is not an artifact of the procedure. The differing proportions of bias and the occurence of neutrality do not support the strong form of linguistic determinism. Interpretation in part reflected the attitudes in the listener. Specifically, females grow up with the frequent experience of identifying the ambiguity of meaning to include themselves as potential referents. For example, in school a teacher might say "Any child who wants to go on the field trip must bring a note of permission from his parents." The females in the class would accept the sentence as including them. Experience of hearing themselves referred to as "he" would allow a recognition of the non-specific meaning of the pronouns to refer to any "he" or "she" in the culture at large, which in turn might allow females to more easily imagine names for both sexes, than males, for whom that sex is a personal reference group.

In the culture at large, males are still more salient as prototypical examples of many professions and leadership positions. Rosch (1975) suggests that prototypes are general reference points to order experience and to navigate in the environment. As a general reference point prototypical examples are more accessible to come to mind, which may explain why there were names for more unknown males than females in Table 3.

The explanation of inherent bias in the form and its reduction for females as a group through experiencing and identifying in the culture at large the ambiguity of intended meaning does not identify why there were approximately

30% of the males who were neutral, and about the same percentage of females who were biased toward male reference. What else could bias the perceiver? One possibility is attitude toward sex roles. Study 3 explored the relation between expressing sex bias and attitudes toward sex roles.

Study 3

The Bem Self Report Inventory (1974) classifies people as masculine or feminine when they judge their self-characteristics to include either stereotypic male or female traits, and as androgynous when they judge their self-characteristics to include both types of traits. One would expect that those of traditional sex type would exhibit more traditional attitudes toward sex roles, including adherence to male dominance. Androgynous people, who more freely identify themselves with the roles of both sexes, are expected to exhibit an attitude of parallel treatment to both sexes. In terms of expressed sex bias, traditional males and females should be more biased toward male dominance than androgynous people.

Procedure, respondents, and setting

In addition to the generic form of the 10 sentences, the same sentences were presented with neutral pronouns such as "they" and "he or she" replacing the male pronouns to see if a shift toward neutrality would occur, replicating the Moulton (et al.) study. The study differed from my class meetings, where I had read the sentences, to volunteers for a Mass Testing. Respondents received a packet of tests, mostly on personality and values. Either the generic or neutral form of the naming survey, and the Bem Self Report Inventory were inserted into the packets with the naming survey occuring before the Bem Inventory. A couple of males and females were discarded for not writing to all sentences, and one for writing descriptors such as "grouch," "scared to death," and "star freak" rather than names. And Bem Inventories were inadvertantly left

out of some packets in the neutral sentence condition. Data of the remaining respondents are reported in Tables 4 and 5 on the handout. In counting the number of male and female names, I noticed responses that had not occured previously, such as self-reference, and of writing in relatives such as sister or brother. Respondents were classified by a median split of Bem Inventory scores (Bem, 1977).

Results

In table 4 of the handout, the 61% biased male respondents with the generic form replicates the classroom setting. The shift to 77% neutral male respondents with the neutral pronouns replicates Moulton (et al., 1978). Females in both conditions demonstrated a bias toward responding with female names rather than with male names, not replicating the classroom setting. There were too few people of each Bem type to do χ^2 tables, but since sex bias would be reflected in the average number of male names for people of each Bem Type, those averages are shown in Table 5 of the handout. Differences were minor, and *t* tests comparing traditional with androgynous respondents in the generic condition were less than 0.4, not significant.

The result of a shift to neutrality with neutral pronouns indicates that the sentences themselves were neutral. But to further check for any bias in the sentences themselves, total number of female and male names written to each sentence in the three studies was examined with the criteria for neutrality being an overall percentage of between 30% to 60% female names. Only sentence #3 (65% female names) and sentence #7 (62% female names) for female respondents and sentence #4 (19% female names) and sentence #7 (65% female names) for male respondents deviated slightly from neutrality.

Discussion

There are two puzzling results here. Why did Bem Type not differentiate who would express bias? Tschudi (1979) found that people disassociate their language use from their self-perceived attributes, which is what the Bem Inventory measures. Forsyth and Forsyth (1980) found that attitudes toward the culture at large, but not the Bem Inventory, related to perception of sex bias.

The differences between attitudes toward oneself and attitudes toward the culture at large also can explain the second puzzling result that females expressed male bias in the classroom setting and female bias in the Mass Testing setting. In the classroom, females took the perspective of the culture at large. From that perspective, and their experiences of identifying the ambiguity to include themselves, they had access to parallel treatment. In the Mass Testing setting, there were many tests which required a focus on personal attributes and personal reference groups rather than on the culture at large. Only in that setting did I find self-reference and close relatives given as names. This focused perspective on themselves may have allowed preferential access to names of their own sex. The change in perspective with the change in setting would not affect the performance of males, since males do not face a contradiction for self-inclusion with the masculine pronouns in the culture at large, and so do not directly experience the ambiguity of function with either perspective. The sex difference in expressed bias appears in other studies as well (Mackay & Fulkerson, 1979; Martyna, 1978; Forsyth & Forsyth, 1980).

The results leave us with an as yet unidentified relation between the occurence of the masculine generic pronouns and their interpretation. The forms themselves, the setting, and the perspective of the perceiver all have some

influence on the interpretation. The studies indicate that the generic masculine function is a problem that in part does perpetuate a sex bias. Thus the results do support the need to pursue alternatives, as suggested by the APA guidelines for non-sexist language (1977), such as explicitly stating both sexes when parallel treatment is intended, rephrasing statements to use the plural pronoun forms, and using indefinite pronouns such as "everyone." The problem for doing so is that generically used masculine pronouns are so automatic a choice for us that conscious effort and attention is needed to recognize their occurence. One advantage of instituting a new form as a substitute, such as "Co" (Spencer, 1978) or "E" (Geiwitz, 1978) is that a new form could function to alert the perceiver through its occurence to consciously consider what the intended reference might be. Whatever alternatives are used when the generic function is noticed, aside from explicitly stating both sexes, the results indicate that retiring the generic use of the masculine pronouns will retire only part of the problem of predominantly male referent interpretation of generically used forms. We need to understand the interaction between the bias inherent in the forms and the biases of the setting and of the perceiver on interpretation. Until we do, substitutes are likely to soon exhibit the same problem of male bias in interpretation as the currently used forms.

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TABLE 1. Sentences with generic pronouns.

1. The child of age 5 will usually be able to tie his own shoes.
2. When someone is tired and hungry he often will also be irritable.
3. The average student often feels isolated when he first comes to college.
4. If a person starts talking outloud to himself, it may be time for him to go to a psychologist.
5. A person typically feels comfortable in his own home.
6. Often, the high school teenager begins to look at himself as an adult, and begins to think seriously about what's next in his future.
7. One's astrological sign is determined by the time, place, and date of his birth.
8. Before getting on a plane or a train or a bus, a passenger should have his ticket ready.
9. Typically a human being becomes emotional when he realizes that he is going to die someday.
10. The average elderly person frequently will complain that his memory is not as good as when he was young.

TABLE 2. Interpretation of masculine generic pronouns.

A*: Respondent bias in writing first names for 5 sentences.

(Number) and sex of respondent	Number and (percent) classified as: Male	Neutral	Female
(16) male	18 (69%)	8 (31%)	0
(57) female	17 (30%)	34 (60%)	6 (10%)

B**: Respondent bias for 10 sentences.

(Number) and sex of respondent	Number and (percent) classified as: Male	Neutral	Female
(28) male	20 (71%)	8 (29%)	0
(52) female	16 (31%)	32 (61%)	4 (8%)

* $\chi^2(1) = 7.56$, $p < .01$.

** $\chi^2(1) = 8.82$, $p < .005$.

TABLE 3. Naming known and unknown people in interpeting masculine generic pronouns.

Names of people	Sex of respondent: Male* Sex, number, and (percent) of names: Male	Female	Female** Male	Female
Known	72 (48%)	28 (56%)	90 (56%)	90 (60%)
Not known	78 (52%)	22 (44%)	160 (64%)	60 (40%)

* $\chi^2(1) = 0.66$ not significant.

* $\chi^2(1) = 7.88$, $p < .005$.

TABLE 4. Interpretation of masculine generic and of neutral sentence forms.

Respondent (numbers) sex, and sentence form	Number and (percent) classified as: Male	Neutral	Female
Male*			
generic (28)	17 (61%)	20 (36%)	1 (3%)
neutral (30)	5 (17%)	23 (77%)	2 (6%)
Female**			
generic (29)	2 (7%)	19 (66%)	8 (27%)
neutral (30)	1 (3.3%)	19 (63.3%)	10 (33.3%)

* $\chi^2(1) = 8.85$, $p < .005$.

** $\chi^2(1) = 0.01$, not significant.

TABLE 5. Bem Inventory classification and average number of male names written by respondents.

Respondent sex and sentence form	(Number) of respondents classified as: Male	Female	Androgynous	Undifferentiated
	Average number of male names			
Male				
generic	(7) 6.7[a]	(6) 7.3	(7) 5.7[a]	(8) 6.9
neutral	(4) 4	(1) 5	(5) 6.4	(2) 6
Female				
generic	(5) 5.2	(6) 4[b]	(9) 5.3[b]	(9) 3.4
neutral	(2) 3	(2) 5	(7) 4	(5) 3.4

[a] t(df 12) = 0.3876

[b] t(df 13) = 0.3088